

WILLIAM DIEHL

(BAD MIC AUDIO AT MOST PARTS)

SUMMARY: Capt. William Diehl talks to Pat Jasper about his career in the coastguards and at the Houston Port Bureau. He recollects how the coastguards handled Hurricane Ike and what it means to save lives. He also talks about how important it is to develop the waterways as a pivotal point in global trading.

TOPICS: accidents, Armed Forces, corporations, job hunting
job postings

Thursday, May 15, 2012

Port of Houston Authority, sub office of greater Houston Port Bureau

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Born in upstate NY. Father college professor. One of 9 children. 6 boys and 3 girls. Had a great childhood. First generation in Maritime Industry. Father had masters degree in organic chemistry. Enlisted and put him in a camp analyzing people coming back from Korea. Older two brothers decided to enlist in the army and got sent over to Germany. Brother went to air force academy. Applied to Meapolis, West point and Coastguard. Finally picked the coastguard. Went on a ship to San Francisco, met wife in SFO. Asked coastguard if could go to graduate school. Was sent to University of Michigan for two years. Got a degree in Naval architecture and marine and mechanical engineering. Was sent to DC. for engineering work. Found it to be very boring.

Exxon Valdez was to be moving from Alaska down to the shipyard in Southern California. Wanted to know whether it was going to break in half? While he said that was a total guess, the next person said he could try. Then a ship blew up off Galveston. Needed a naval architect to come and see whether the ship would break in half. Was sent to Galveston.

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They needed advice on how to solve. Volunteered to help. Show the ship footage from a videotape. Decided it wasn't going to break in half. Explained why and was asked to go out there to represent them.

Next day get out to the ship. Meet ship crew firefighters who are there and who had fought at Desert Storm. Learnt many important lessons during the initial years of working there.

After that another ship blew up. Salvage crew knew his name and asked for him to be sent to Michigan. Wanted to create a salvage team. Formed a coastguard salvage team.

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Learned was comfortable in a crisis and not nervous. Have the right mindset to function. Years later promoted to be at the top of the job and moved to Houston. Had a very capable assistant. Had a few search and rescue cases., casualties, oil spills, drug busts. Responsible for 1200 people. Went to meet the Admiral because center was fairly new and was getting a lot of calls for every job. Went back to the office and decided on a new way to work. Told employees to send text messages instead of calling for every little thing. Came on the heels of Katrina and Rita. Coastguard was struggling over how to do a hurricane response. Game plan was to go to San Antonio. Plan was to find a place close enough but far enough away. Wanted a place to stage all coastguard equipment and would be able to rush in when the storm passes. Finally decided to set up in Katy. When hurricane came had enough trial runs under the belt and knew exactly what to do. Had a good team on board. Felt comfortable about doing a good job. Trick with Hurricane Ike was it was headed to Freeport, and when the storm entered the Gulf of Mexico it was time to act. Was informed about the numbers of Hurricane Ike by the authorities. Had to stay put until everyone had evacuated.

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One helicopter stayed back to take pictures so it can be looked at later and studied. But had to send them to pick up three people down at Corpus christi. But it turned out there were more than a 100 people stranded. Do not rescue people before a hurricane. Have to be ready to act when it does hit. Had to have a big discussion and ended up rescuing the people stranded there. One of those crisis where no one will advice against it. Had to get some military helicopters from DOD. Was flying them to Ellington and dropping them off. Since it was too far off, instead took them down to the dog track on I 45 and asked the police to cut the locks and just dropped more than a 100 people over there. It was also like a pitstop for the pilots. Really pushed the envelope.

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People started calling asking for help. Had to tell them would come to them when the storm passed. Weighed heavily on conscience. Another incident when ship was to hit the bridge. Called the captain from the office. Asked ship captain to back down full. WERE about to hit the 610 bridge. If ship hits the bridge, the cars on the bridge would go straight to the water. Tried to get cops to get on the scene and close the bridge. Told him to steer to the middle of the bridge when close by and go full back and then full forward. Had tugs ready to respond but they were not ready to go out in a hurricane.

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When storm is upon them, plans have to be followed and not changed. Buoy tenders that push them up to Galveston. Brought them up all the way up to Galena Park and put them at the Manchester Terminal. They come up the ship channel and they are slow.

Orchestrating all this from the Katy office. An employee from New Orleans calls up and disagrees with the buoy idea. This decision is non reversible to move the cutters to Manchester terminal. If it goes up another four feet it would tip over. It would mean they would lose the coastguard cutters. Senior chief suggested abandoning ship when the measurement device showed two feet. Thought would lose two cutters but would manage to save everyone on board. But in the end, the wind shifted and ended up not losing the cutters.

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IN the coastguard there are a lot of young people. Have a son who turned 18 recently, through career had a lot of people between 18-22 as employees. Despite all the other jobs that a coastguard has to do the main thing is saving lives. Putting the buoys on the side of the ship channel, like painting the white lines on the side of the road. Telling people till where they are allowed where they will be safe. It all comes back to saving lives.

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Felt had a good career at the coastguard. Had dinner once with people from Shell and wanted to talk to him about oil spills, response etc. THEY had brought up the topic of raising children. Shell did a study about what happens when moving a child before high school, it is beneficial to the child, more confident and comfortable etc. If they move when they are in high school, it has a detrimental effect. Did not want to move family unnecessarily. Looked at jobs in the maritime community. Had a few job offers. Was asked to be city manager. But if went away from the water front, would be very difficult to come back. Knew that needed to stay at the maritime community, The chairman invited him for dinner and offered him the job to take over the port bureau. But port authority was doing very badly then. Was told by port authority that would be fired if it did not make money.

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Simplified what the port bureau does like he had done for the coastguards. Port bureau provides information. Whether it is about networking, or ship movement the port bureau gives information about ships, industry, and community. Have been working on those lines. Back in 2009 had 95 companies and now have a 140 companies. Probably a 50% increase in revenues.

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Membership - Exxon and Shell and large terminals, tug companies to the ships themselves, to the agents, owners reps, the mooring companies, the bunker fuels - everyone who touches the ship needs info to be successful. Most places people can go down and see the port. But in Houston cant even see the ship channel, can only see

refineries. In Houston bracketed by the oil industry, the refineries. For eg. when going to Bush Airport, there is ticketing agent, the pilot, the airline, food service etc. Have the same thing. Have a pilot, fuel trucks or bunker barges, line handlers, owners reps or agents, there are a lot of similarities between both the modes of transport. Instead of looking at the big screen at the airport with flight times, dispense info in a different way. Use a program called Harbor lights.

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((PHONE RINGS LOUDLY))

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Association of 160 companies. Want to do the same thing that the port bureau does. Tell them that we would do the same thing for them. There are people dealing with each company. Do three organizations.

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Port of Houston authority is a government organization, MAke a lot of money off containers. Not in the soil business. There are a 150 companies and secondary companies along the ship channel. Serve as a conduit between what they want to do to a broader discussion with the other industry members. At the same time when the industry wants to get involved, and make their concerns known.

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The port exists to move commerce, goods. The security is not needed unless moving bodies. There are people on board but it is mainly packages. Try to acknowledge the liability or try to transfer the risk to someone else most often through insurance. Environmental issues, cant gran that risk and control it and mitigate it, could go out of business. Security is a liability too. If there is a terrorist incident, could go out of business. It is a new liability that wasn't there before. Need to figure out how to minimize security liability. After Exxon Valdez all oil companies were told they need to have spill response equipment, specialized trained personnel ready to act and firehouses on every street corner. What happens is, few year later all companies are equipped with all the gear that is now just sitting there. Because there aren't fires every week. So what is being done at the ship channel security district is to gather the funds and pay the people who are in office to keep up the security. Wanted to focus on officers at the spot rather than equipment. THere are officers with badges and have given them the equipment to maintain security.

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The value of the port is so underestimated. As a country build the dept. of transportation in the 1940s model where there are going to be highways and rail so that the whole country can engage in commerce. Now, things have accelerated, the world is in a global market. But infrastructure remains the same. No one maintains that the port is worthy of

anything. But the role of the port has changed in global commerce. Has become more important. Teddy Roosevelt - Panama canal, love for waterway. Need to place a lot more emphasis on waterways. Port cities will continue to do well, ramps to global highways. Moving commerce globally through ships. Other countries like China have caught on to this idea except for America. A quarter of all the tonnage comes through Houston. Houston is the juggernaut of commerce. Maritime capital of the US not just the energy capital.